

AN EXPLORATION INTO THE LULLABIES AND DIRGES OF WOMEN

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Selvy Thiruchandran, *Feminine Speech Transmissions: An Exploration into the Lullabies and Dirges of Women*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, and Colombo: Women's Education and Research Centre, 2001.

Selvy Thiruchandran's book is essentially a description and analysis of two types of verses from the oral tradition that used to be commonly sung by women in Tamil society over time, even though the popularity of these have diminished in more recent times. The types of verses Thiruchandran has focused on are *tallattu* and *oppari*, which are described by her as lullabies and lament songs respectively. In Sri Lanka, these types of songs are found generally in three locations: in the north among Northern Tamils, in the east among Muslims who also speak Tamil, and in the hill country among Tamils of Indian origin. The common strand that runs through these verses is the language despite its regional variations and in some clear cases the differences in experiences depicted in the lyrics as well. Thiruchandran suggests that women's verses in the oral tradition such as *tallattu* and *oppari* should be viewed from the perspective four broad areas: 1) women's role as performers, 2) how women use these verses, 3) women's specific creativities being conditioned and constrained by their social environment, and 4) women's verbal arts being part of the subjective consciousness of the self (p.3).

According to Thiruchandran's analysis, *tallattu* as lullabies fulfil a number of functions. These include the immediate purpose of putting a baby to sleep, while they are also sung when a baby is being breast-fed allowing the baby to concentrate on her feeding (p.8). In addition, these songs also open an outlet for mothers to openly express certain desires, which includes love for her children as well as concerns for their safety and expectations of their future (p.11). In this context, *tallattu* are "confined to a particular time and space, and to a gender category" (p.2). These verses are usually sung by mothers and female members of a child's kin group within a private domain, while they are directly linked to childhood in terms of their contents (p.2). Nevertheless, Thiruchandran points out that *tallattu* can move beyond the confines of the home and to a more public realm such as the field or the market in situations where women take their children to these spaces (p. 2).

In the north, the *tallattu* were mostly secular and they expressed deep emotions and kinship ties across members of extended families (p.15). In addition, they also retain the traditions of other Tamil literary creations in the way similes and metaphors are used to

convey notions of beauty, gentleness and sweetness of babies (p. 15). By contrast, *tallattu* from the Eastern Province indicates clear differences in terms of content. One of these is the emphasis on Islam which has taken place when the original Tamil (Hindu) *tallattu* were adopted and adapted by eastern Muslims to suit their own personal and religious circumstances. Even here, while certain new elements were introduced, the basic structure and purpose of the verses remained consistent. However, this basic structure and purpose changed in the context of the genre of *tallattu* known as *uptesapillai tallattu sintu* (which preach to children). Here, the primary purpose was to "explain the duties of a good Muslim citizen and give instructions on cultivating good habits and virtues" (p. 13).

The *tallattu* of the hill-country Tamils of Indian origin also indicates some regional variations based on historical processes as well as socio-cultural and physical circumstances. As Thiruchandran points out, the Tamil women in the hill country also gave their *tallattu* a religious flavour where they constructed the "God of the Hills" as their saviour (p.22). In a sense, some of the lyrics in these verses offer a microscopic social history of migration, resettlement, anxiety and evolution of a particular ethnic community in a new locations. In one *tallattu* that Thiruchandran refers to there is a reference to the mountain Child God, the Lord Of Palani who is a god from the pantheon in Tamil Nadu (2001: 22), the general area from where British colonial rulers brought the early estate workers to work in Sri Lankan tea plantations. However, with settlement in the hill country, the emphasis on God of Palani shifted to God Kataragama, the pre-eminent deity worshipped by the hill-country Tamils in the Sri Lankan context (p.22- 31).

When compared to *tallattu*, *oppari* as a genre of verse appears to be the opposite of *tallattu* in the sense that they are sung indicating grief, contextualizing them as ritual lament songs (p.34). As Thiruchandran points out, *oppari* has ritual status as well as dramatic elements enmeshed within it. When a death happens, women in the household get together and weep loudly, indirectly announcing the news of the death to the neighbourhood. At this point women in the vicinity assemble in a circle around the body with their hands around each other's necks and join in the collective crying (p.34).

From this point onwards, "lamentations flow poetically with rhymes and alliterations in a tune that is symptomatic of grief" (p.34). Structurally, and in terms of content, the lyrics consist of praises and virtues of the dead individual (p.34). *Oppari* serves as a medium of remembrance of dead persons while it also serves as a form of catharsis for the self for the grief-stricken survivors (p. 41). There is also a belief that *oppari* appeases the soul of a dead person, thereby achieving "a peaceful accent to the other world" (p.41).

Thiruchandran suggests that *oppari* is an extension of the *saramkavi* traditions of Tamils which are post-death poems composed by poets on the deaths of kings and nobles (p. 41). Usually women as a group collectively sing *oppari* to express grief. But on occasion, they can also be sung by a woman by herself.

As Thiruchandran indicates, *oppari* has also undergone change in keeping with socio-political transformations in society. One such example is the occasion where Catholic writers in Jaffna have used the *oppari* format to describe the death of Jesus Christ, and "used this highly emotive literary form for conversion" (p.39). Thiruchandran also refers to at least two occasions when the *oppari* form had been used as part of protest in contemporary political conflict (p.70-71). It would have been of considerable academic interest to explore manifestations of contemporary uses of *oppari* more extensively, particularly as the writer points out that *oppari* as a verse form is almost extinct in Tamil society.

In general, the main contribution of Thiruchandran's book is its ability to bring into public as well as anthropological discourse in Sri Lanka two genres of verse associated with women in Tamil-speaking society which are generally not known outside of that linguistic community. She also manages to re-focus the attention of individuals interested in the sociology of gender upon an area of study that is clearly under-researched in the Sri Lankan academic context. In addition, she also briefly outlines how these verses

have transformed themselves in the context of changing socio-cultural and political conditions of those who sing them. For instance, the subtle variations among the *tallattu* of northern Tamils, eastern Muslims and hill-country Tamils places in context specific historical processes, particular shifts in identity and specific shifts in religious beliefs.

Its main limitation of the book is its thinness of ethnography in the sense that not adequate numbers of verses seem to have been collected to make this a substantial analysis. But as Thiruchandran herself points out early on, this is partly due to technical limitations. Much of the material for the study has been collected from sources already published, which unfortunately is not substantial. This material, not collected and recorded with any serious degree of scholarly rigour also cannot be periodized except on certain occasions where specific references to incidents or particular linguistic structures may allow for periodization and therefore more accurate contextualization. Given the fact these are part of a vanishing oral tradition, particularly in the case of *oppari*, it would have been useful to conduct long-term fieldwork at least to establish nothing else other than what has already been recorded is available for scholarly analysis. On the other hand, the social and political analysis that Thiruchandran undertakes in a very brief fashion through the verses could have been progressively expanded with additional theoretical rigour which would have strengthened the analysis and added to the ethnographic quality of the work.

If some of these shortcomings had been addressed, it would have been possible to produce something like Laila Abu-Lughod's well-known ethnography *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) Nevertheless, in our specific context, generally marked by an increasing lack of knowledge about ourselves, Thiruchandran's work would add to our knowledge about a cultural and social tradition in Tamil society that may well disappear in times to come.

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